Carbon tax being used to improve health

The Toronto Star

September 20, 2018 Thursday

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Section: OPINION; Pg. A17

Length: 711 words

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Body

On Friday, when the Ontario government filed arguments to challenge the federal government's carbon tax, Rod Phillips, Ontario's minister of environment, conservation and parks declared, "We have a mandate from the people of Ontario to use every tool at our disposal to protect Ontario families and businesses from the federal carbon tax."

As health professionals, we are shocked to find that our new government believes Ontario families need protection from a policy designed to bring climate change under control, rather than from climate change itself.

We just experienced a blistering hot summer in Ontario and all around the world - one of the hottest four summers in recorded history, a trend attributed by experts to climate change.

Over the last three and a half months, the temperature at Toronto airport exceeded 28 C on more than 40 days. Many of those days were also very humid, making them unbearably hot.

These are dangerous temperatures that strain the heart and lungs and put people in the hospital and in the grave. We know this. In Quebec, the only province in Canada that tracks heat-related deaths in real time, July's heat wave claimed the lives of over 90 people in only one week.

Wildfires, fuelled by climate-driven droughts and heat, also ran rampant this summer. They claimed the lives of 90 people in Greece and nine in California this summer, and threatened the lives, health and well-being of millions of Canadians. Ontario had 1,312 wildfires this year; up from a 10-year average of 716.

We are talking about stressful events; events that evoke fear for the safety of one's family and anxiety about property loss; events that disrupt work lives and school schedules; events that can require visits to doctors and hospitals. What were the health and financial costs of these wildfires to Ontario residents this year? What were the costs to those who depend upon tourism for business? What were the costs to the health care system; to tax payers who must pay for firefighters?

In the midst of this worldwide heat wave, the National Academy of Science published an alarming study that suggests that we are approaching a tipping point with climate change; a point from which there may be no return.

This study found that we are quickly approaching a global temperature that could trigger feedback cycles that drive global temperature to 4 or 5 C above pre-industrial temperatures. These are temperatures that would, in the words of the researchers, make Earth uninhabitable; that would be associated with sea levels that are 10 to 60 meters above current sea levels.

In the midst of all this, how can our provincial government be focused on dismantling a climate action plan that was 10 years in development?

Ontario's cap and trade program, which allowed industry to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a cost-effective way, also brought in $2.8 billion in funds that were being directed toward public transit, energy efficiency and renewable energy projects for schools, hospitals, farms and municipalities, cycling lanes and electric vehicles. In other words, the program was reducing climate emissions from the major sources in Ontario.

However, that is not all that Ontario's cap-and-trade program was doing. Investments in public transit will reduce air pollution and decrease traffic congestion. Investments in energy efficiency for homes, schools, hospitals and low-income housing will reduce air pollution, save consumers money and create local jobs. And investments in renewable energy and electric vehicles will reduce air pollution and health care costs while encouraging innovation and new economic opportunities for Ontario residents. As health professionals who work to protect the health of Canadians, we at the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), urge the Ontario Government to recognize the true costs of climate change - to the health of Ontario residents, to tax payers and, moreover, to future generations.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: CARBON TAX (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); ENVIRONMENTAL DEPARTMENTS (90%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (90%); CLIMATE ACTION (89%); CLIMATOLOGY (89%); EXTREME TEMPERATURES (89%); FAMILY (89%); HEAT WAVES (89%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (89%); WILDFIRES (89%); FIRES (87%); CONSERVATION (78%); EMISSIONS (78%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (78%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (78%); HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS (78%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (78%); POLLUTION MONITORING, PREVENTION & REMEDIATION (78%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (78%); SAFETY (78%); TRENDS (75%); WEATHER (75%); MEDICINE & HEALTH (73%); PROFESSIONAL WORKERS (71%); RESEARCH REPORTS (71%); GREENHOUSE GASES (70%); HEAT STRESS DISORDERS (70%); HISTORY (69%); DEATH & DYING (68%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (68%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%)

Industry: CARBON TAX (90%); EMISSIONS (78%); HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS (78%); HOSPITALS (72%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (68%); HEALTH CARE (67%)

Geographic: TORONTO, ON, CANADA (79%); ONTARIO, CANADA (90%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); QUEBEC, CANADA (58%); CANADA (94%)

Load-Date: September 20, 2018

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